

Written Evidence submitted by Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Prof. Carlos Vargas-Silva and Dr Bethany Robertson (LS0035)

We are academics working across migration labour market and farm labour. Dr Roxana Barbulescu, Associate Professor in the School of Sociology and Social Policy University of Leeds, Professor Carlos Vargas-Silva is Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) and Professor in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford. Dr Bethany Robertson, Research Fellow for the Feeding the nation project, University of Leeds

Evidence base for the submission. The following submission builds on evidence collected as part of the ESRC funded project *Feeding the nation: Seasonal Migrant Workers and Food Security during COVID 19 Pandemic Project* (<https://feedingthenation.leeds.ac.uk/>).

Data and methodology literature review and primary data collected from 71 interviews with migrant seasonal workers and 29 survey responses from British growers. The interviews with workers included EUSS holders, Seasonal Worker Pilot Visa holders. The study uses a national UK-wide sample. The interviews are in-depth one hour long. For the migrant workers, the interviews were conducted in their native languages. The data was collected in the period May2021-October 2021.

Consultation findings

We submit evidence for the questions 1,2,3 and 5. Our findings indicate that 1) two thirds of farming business incurred a shortage of workers in 2021 and eight out of ten indicated that it has been more difficult to recruit seasonal farm workers in 2021 2) in 2021 six in ten farmers employ the same number of British workers as in 2019 3) domiciliated EUSS workers in seasonal farm work are more likely to have pre-settled than means that they will need to meet the requirements for settled status in five years time or lose the right to stay and work in the UK thus further shrinking the eligible pool and increasing shortages in farm labour; 5) finally we present evidence on country hopping for EUSS and visa holders.

Consultation responses

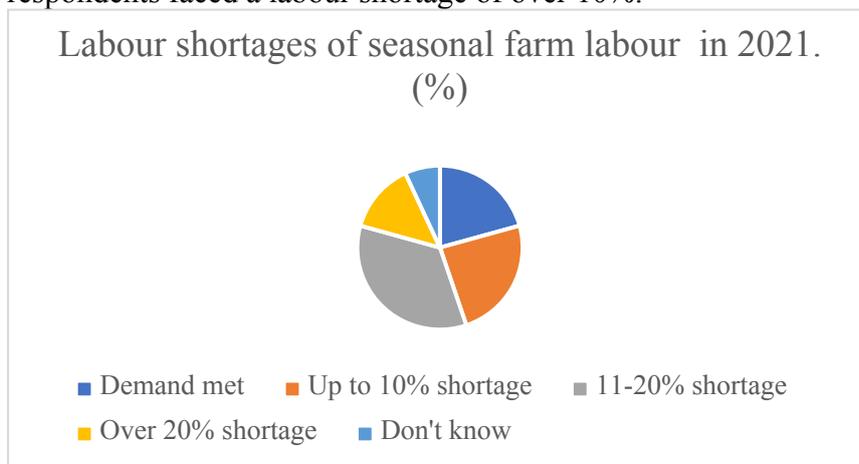
Question 1 What is the extent and nature of labour shortages currently being experienced in the food supply chain?

Extent of labour shortages in seasonal agricultural work and impact on British food production

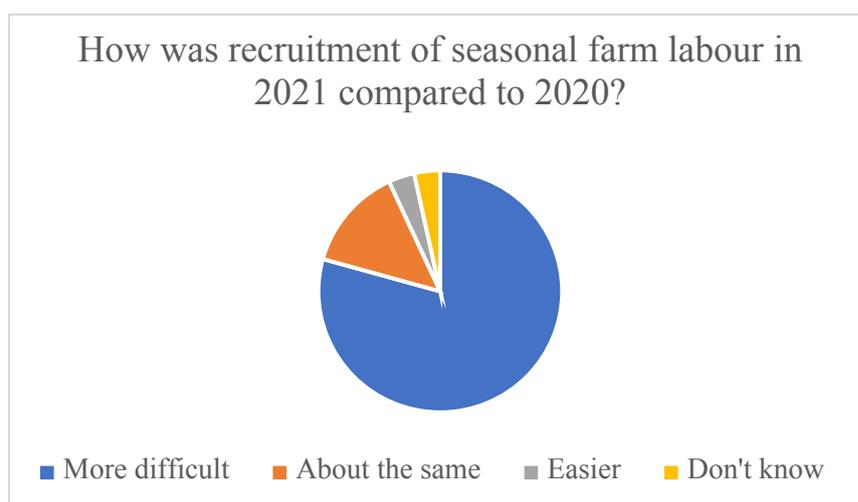
Despite increased efforts to attract, recruit and retain workers in the sector, British growers report deficits of workers in their individual businesses between 0% and -25% for the calendar year 2021. 6 in 29 businesses had recruited 100% of the workers they needed, see answer to Q5. The great majority of farm businesses, 17 in 29, employed the same number of British workers as in 2020.

Key findings:

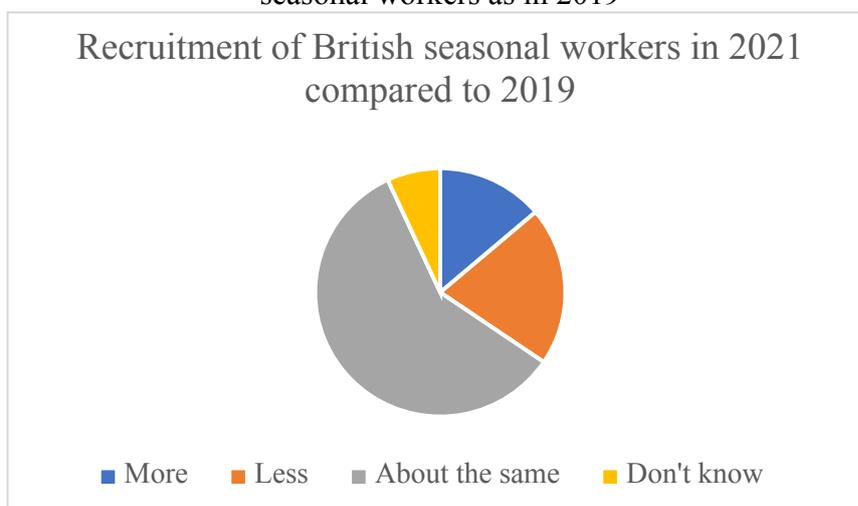
- 69% of respondents experienced labour shortages in 2021 and 70% of these respondents faced a labour shortage of over 10%.



- 79% of respondents said it was more difficult to recruit seasonal workers in 2021 compared to 2020.



- 59% of respondents reported to have recruited 'about the same' number of British seasonal workers as in 2019



British growers told us that due to the difficulties in bring in the workers they have introduced a number of strategies to keep their businesses financially viable:

- a) moved production overseas
- b) increased exports to countries that pay higher premium for fresh British produce (e.g. berries export to Middle East and Gulf countries)
- c) in anticipation of increased imports, they decreased production gradually over time and invested in extending capacity in the pack house.
- d) invested in automation in the pack house to reduce labour demand while maintaining same level of production.

Consequences

This is important as a), b) c) lead to less food production for the UK market, increased risks for food security and longer food supply chain - the later which are more exposed to global demands.

Smaller producers who had more difficulties in accessing workers via the visa system suggested *'this might be the beginning of the end'*.

Question 2. What are the factors driving labour shortages in the food supply chain?

2.1. End of freedom of movement following Brexit

The single most important cause of the shortages is Brexit and the end of freedom of movement that therefore cut unmediated access to workers from A2 and A8 countries – dominant countries of origin since 2000. Seasonal Pilot Visa (T5) that came to respond to the demand for migrant workers in agriculture, was capped at 30,000 below industry estimates (NFU reference) - a number which was confirmed only on December the 22nd 2020. Moreover, the operators of the Pilot were announced only in April 2021. Both dates being relatively late for agricultural cycle. For many crops including strawberries picking season starts in May. This left employers very little time to recruit workers.

2.2. Systematic challenges in bring in British workers into the sector

Unemployed workers tend to live in midsize towns and cities while farms are located in rural settings and there are little or no transport links. We found that EUSS workers carpoled to farms or pay for special bus (return ticket at £8 from pick up point to farm was very common). To attract seasonal workers some farmers have started to offer free transportation from pick up points in the cities.

For the living in caravan accommodation, transport was also an issue for doing the weekly shopping or for leisure on their day off.

Access to rural areas is limited to those further afield and it is often not possible for workers to relocate for the season only.

British workers who took on seasonal work on a farm via the *Pick for Britain* scheme and thus had been attracted to the sector at the advertised pay, were disappointed with pay and left the sector before the end of the first month. While attracting and recruitment were successful, more intervention and support is needed to remove obstacles to retention and make people want to join the farming industry.

2.3. Lack of technological and financially viable solutions.

Seasonal workers specialise on picking and plant care for multiple crops as most farms have diverse crops to increase profitability over more months for example asparagus season is followed by strawberries which is then followed by cherries on the same farm, work done by the same workers. This crop diversification can be difficult to automate as it requires different technological solutions.

2.4. Lack of public understanding of piece rate system and national minimum wage for work in agriculture.

Over 80% of the seasonal migrant farm workers did not understand how their pay was calculated which had an impact on their decision short, mid term and long term by either considering leaving the job, returning the following year or remaining in the sector. For example, some farms are better employers and pay overtime after 40 h while others adhere to the legislation starting to pay only after 48h but workers do not understand why two similar farms pay overtime differently. In addition, annual leave entitlements vary particularly in the devolved nations Scotland, Northern Ireland regulated under Agricultural Wage Board.

2.5 ‘Country hopping’ for seasonal migrant workers

Seasonal migrant workers may remain in the sector but move to another country, a phenomenon known as country hopping.

EUSS workers

- European workers said they had worked in seasonal agriculture in other EU countries and the UK was a second or third immigration country for them. This was particularly the case with Bulgarian and Romanian Roma families who had resided in previous countries of migration and have acquired Spanish, Greek and Italian nationality.
- EUSS who find the work via agencies to the UK, they tend to have experience and if considering ‘hopping’ the preferred destinations are Netherlands, Germany or Belgium and the reason is that these country hire via agencies (which is not the case in Italy, Spain where recruitment in origin and direct employment are preferred recruitment regimes)

EUSS workers might chose to re-migrate towards EU destinations listed above because easier access and guaranteed status as part of the European Union. For this reason,

Northern Ireland might be particularly exposed as seasonal workers can easily relocate in Ireland without significant transition costs.

For visa holders:

Preferred destinations for visa holders:

- Scandinavian countries (Norway, Finland and to some extent Sweden) historically recruit from Ukraine and former USSR countries for horticulture including wild berries.
- Germany because it is a traditional destination for immigrants from Eastern Europe not only because of its DDR connection with Russia and the eastern block. Furthermore, Germany also signed bilateral mobility and trade agreements with countries in the region, the latest being with Georgia which is also becoming an important recruitment port for the UK operators.
- Poland is the number one destination for Ukrainians with a community of over 1 million. Geographical proximity, language proximity and most importantly special light touch immigration route for Ukrainians makes it attractive.

In the study, some participants have went on seasonal worker visas to Scandinavian countries (Norway in this case).

Question 3 What is the outlook for the labour shortage situation in the coming months and years?

3.1 Shrinking eligible EUSS workforce due to losing EUSS status.

2,4 million and 48% of European citizens in UK have pre-settled status -this status allows them the right to remain in Britain for five years only. To accrue settled status that would give them indefinite leave to remain EUSS is challenging those with lower educational outcomes and fewer English language skills such as the seasonal workers and farmworkers more broadly. It was found that over two thirds in our sample had pre-settled status and hence are at risk to not consolidate their right to remain in the UK. We have heard from the farmers that EUSS workers make the majority of returnees who are most favoured by farmers as they are experienced pickers with commitment to the sector and the most skilled, most productive and best earning pickers in the field. If these workers cannot consolidate their immigration status, in five years time the domestic pool of workers will further diminish increasing labour shortages in the sector at the same time that it increases reliance on British workers and visa holders.

3.2. EUSS seasonal workers who need support in managing their digital status

In the interviews with the EUSS workers in seasonal work, it was found that an estimated 15% did not know how to manage their EUSS electronic status and could not produce proof of right to work when we interviewed them. Demonstrating EUSS status is a complicated online procedure constituted of eleven independent steps which workers with limited digital skills find difficult to access.

3.3. Shrinking eligible EUSS workforce due to aging within European communities.

The study finds that the demography of the EUSS workers is different from that of the workers arriving via the visa scheme, with the former being older. Amongst participants in the study, they are predominantly in their 30s and 40s with a range from 20 to 62. In turn, all the participants in the visa scheme are in their 20s. Therefore as EUSS communities age, it will introduce a stronger reliance on Visa scheme.

Question 5 What measures has the Government taken to alleviate the problems being faced by the food supply chain this year? To what extent have they been successful?

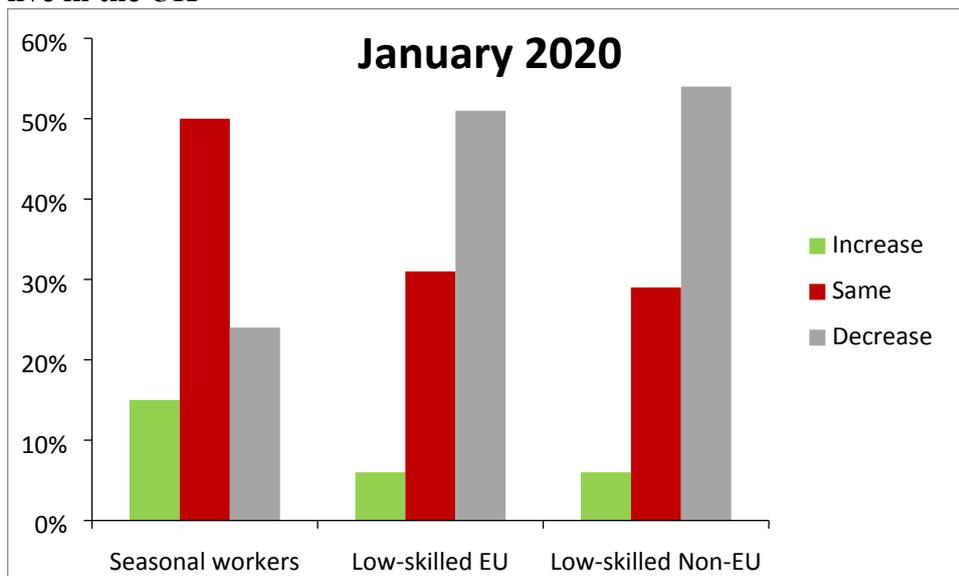
5.1 Vetting of labour providers that operated the Pilot generated good practices and avoided the creation of bogus employers

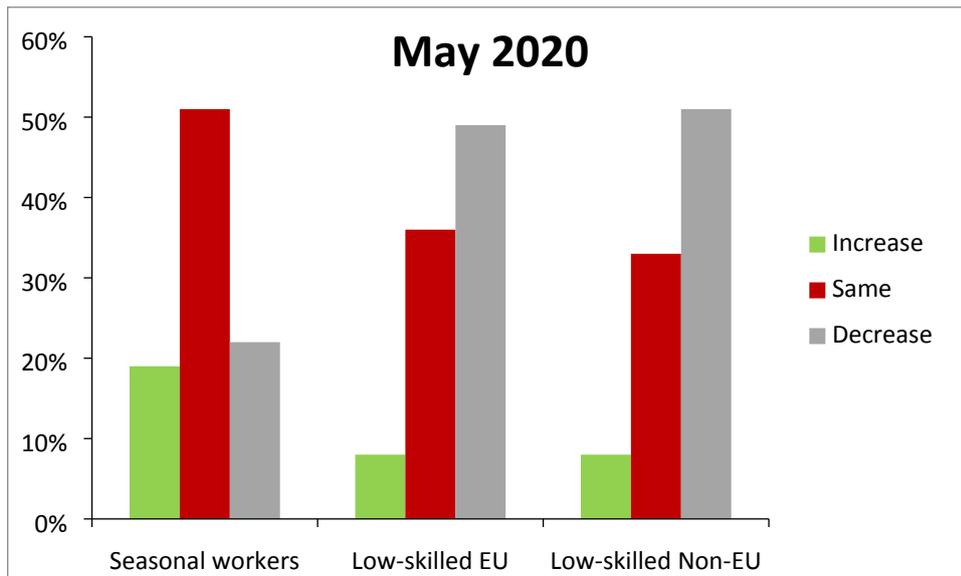
To meet the labour demand in seasonal horticulture the Seasonal Worker Pilot Visa was confirmed in December 2020 and extended to 30,000 workers. The Pilot was successful in organising the Pilot via vetted operators that are further certified by the Gangmaster and Labour Authority. While some farmers expressed a preference for direct employment and direct sponsorship, the operator based system has enabled good practices as well as agile and quick implementation of procedures (for example COVID safe practices) across the sector. This regime also prevented the appearance of fake and bogus employers.

5.2 Confirming Seasonal Workers visa under Tier 5 Temporary Visa system

The Seasonal workers' visa remains the only explicit low-skilled immigration route that is open to any migrant around the globe. Similarly, European workers are subject to immigration control. Over half per cent of the public opinion favours seasonal overseas workers at the levels of previous years. (Figure 1)

Figure 1 Preferences for increasing and decreasing different migrant groups coming to live in the UK





Pollster ICM Unlimited. Funder: British Future. n = 2305 for January, n = 2043 for May. See details of survey at <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/would-you-prefer-the-number-of-seasonal-workers-from-the-eu-to-increase-decrease-or-remain-about-the-same/?notes>

Question asked: Policies on immigration often affect specific groups of people coming to live in the UK. For each of following groups, please tell us whether you would prefer the number of people coming to live in the UK to increase, decrease, or remain about the same?

October 2021